

## **Australia's changing outlook on China: from strategic threat to strategic partner**

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The release of Australia's new Defence White Paper (DWP) on May 3 was nothing short of a repudiation of its 2009 predecessor. Gone were the references to China's increasing military heft as a threat to regional and global stability. In its place, the DWP declared that both the United States and China seek a mix of cooperation and competition but not outright conflict. Australia does not need to choose between the two with its strategic gut or economic mind. It is in the interest of the United States to see that China develops greater ties with close allies like Australia. This updated DWP helps set the framework for exactly that.

The DWP tonal shift is also part of recent pattern of behavior from Australia that is beneficial from the perspective of U.S. strategic interests in stability. Mike Green applauds the emphasis on the Indo-Pacific concept and the recalibration from previous strategic policies that focus on stopping the enemy making beachhead on Australia's northern border. Last month, Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard achieved a diplomatic coup with the establishment of annual strategic talks between Australia's prime minister and the Chinese premier, as well as meetings for Australia's foreign affairs minister, treasurer and trade minister with their counterparts.

But not all are convinced by this. Professor Hugh White from the Australian National University is convinced these talks now make Australia a pawn in the power play between the United States and China. Nothing could be further from the truth.

"Containing" China is a red herring. White's idea that any state or states acting together could contain the fastest growing country in the world with one of the largest populations makes little theoretical or practical sense.

Indeed the other aspects of Gillard's announcement last month tightening links with China relate to many soft power measures. Gillard's aim from this trip was to broaden relations to be more than just selling minerals and offering Chinese students degree opportunities. To truly cash in on the Asian Century that she has been promoting the last few months, Gillard has been pushing a blueprint for Australia to be the top governance provider for China of health, legal standards, urban planning, welfare services, clean energy expertise, water management and sanitation.

This broadening and deepening of Australian-Sino relations will no doubt reap dividends in the years ahead and also helps indicate how off key Hugh White's perspective is on this issue. It shows Australia's own "rebalance" from seeing China as a mixed economic-opportunity-cum-strategic-threat, to strategic partner across a range of issues.

On top of these newly established talks and tone of the DWP, it is worth the United States actively encouraging Australia and China to develop greater military ties. While Australian Defense and the PLA already have a solid relationship, it could also be deepened. In essence, Australia should make the most of its "smart power." Promoted by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, John Kerry would do well to reinvigorate this concept to demonstrate the continued commitment of the Obama Administration to the "rebalance" in the Asia-Pacific beyond military and strategic considerations.

The U.S. foreign policy apparatus should do what it can on both a bilateral and multilateral level with both Australia and China to cheer for closer bilateral ties between the two countries. The establishment of strategic talks and framework of the new DWP set the tone for such a discourse.

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